Chapter 1

Scene Song: "A Lifetime" ~ Better Than Ezra

Friday in Pelmont came in hot and beautiful. The sky stretched over Pelmont in a perfect blue sweep, not a cloud anywhere, the bright orange sun hanging over everything like a polished coin. Summer had settled itself deep into the day already, eighty degrees and climbing, the palm trees swaying softly in the ocean breeze, the whole city gleaming white and gold like Miami Beach pulled through a dream. By late afternoon, the Pelmont arena was alive. The stands were packed, the overhead lights huge and bright, the court shining under them like glass. Music blasted between whistles, people shouted from every direction, vendors moved through the aisles, and the giant screens flashed player stats and hype reels while the crowd buzzed with the kind of anticipation that made the whole building feel electric. The Pelmont Pythons were playing the Charlotte Ballers, and Jimmy and Ian were in the middle of it all.

Ian had taken Jimmy to the game in one of those quietly deliberate efforts he'd been making more and more of lately—small father-figure things, little outings and shared time, things Ian never made grand speeches about but Jimmy noticed anyway. Father's Day was only a few days off, and though neither of them had said that out loud, it hung somewhere quietly between the lines of the evening. Jimmy, however, was too busy being dazzled to think too hard about any of that just yet. He sat forward in his seat in one of his usual tracksuits, chains on, rings flashing every time he moved, his tiara catching the arena lights every few seconds like an act of rebellion against all ordinary sports spectatorship. He looked half warlord, half overexcited child, and the effect was ridiculous enough that Ian had already had to laugh twice just watching him react to things.

"Come on, you bastards!" Jimmy shouted at the court as one of the Ballers fumbled a pass.

A few people in the row ahead turned at the sound of his voice, then laughed when they saw the full visual of him. Jimmy didn't care. When the crowd rose, he rose. When the crowd booed, he booed. When the crowd roared, he roared louder. At one point, when one of the Ballers landed a clean three-pointer that sent half the stadium into screaming chaos, Jimmy shot up fast.

"HOWZAT!" Jimmy barked at the top of his lungs, pointing at the court like the player had done it personally for him.

Ian laughed beside him, clapping hard with the rest of the crowd.

"That one was good," Ian said.

"That was *beautiful*," Jimmy shot back, still standing. "That Python defender moved like he had fuckin' cinder blocks in his shoes."

Ian shook his head, smiling, and Jimmy dropped back into his seat still smiling, his eyes bright and fixed on the court with the kind of total investment that made him seem younger than he ever let himself look anywhere else. It was his first basketball game. That fact alone made Ian keep glancing at him every now and then with a private kind of fondness. Jimmy didn't know all the rules, but he knew enough to follow the flow, enough to yell at the right times, enough to decide who he hated moment to moment depending on who messed up the Ballers' rhythm. Every time there was a pause in the action, he had another observation, another curse, another half-correct analysis delivered with total certainty. By halftime, the Ballers were ahead, but only barely. The arena swelled with noise as people stood, stretched, headed for concessions, or stayed glued to the halftime entertainment on the floor. Ian leaned back in his seat and took a sip of his beer.

"This is good," Ian said, "I'm enjoying this."

Jimmy, still briefly half standing with one hand on the back of the seat in front of him, looked over with a smile.

"This is brilliant," Jimmy replied. "The Ballers are playin' good, they just keep fumblin' the easy shite. That last turnover was criminal. Absolutely criminal. But the Pythons are startin' to look rattled, so I think the Ballers still got 'em."

Ian watched him for a second before smiling.

"You want anything?"

Jimmy looked at him. For one moment, he didn't answer. There was the briefest hesitation in him, small enough that most people might've missed it. But Ian saw it, he saw the uncertainty there, the old reflex in Jimmy that still sometimes showed up when care was offered too directly, too freely. The part of him that didn't always know how much he was allowed to ask for. Jimmy's mouth pulled into a faint, brief smile. He shook his head.

"No, I'm good."

Ian looked at him steadily, then he gave one soft laugh.

"That's bullshit," Ian said with a smile.

Jimmy blinked. Ian was already pulling out his phone.

"You want something, don't be afraid to ask, Jimmy."

Jimmy opened his mouth, half to protest, half to laugh, but Ian was already opening the team app.

"One beer for me," Ian said, tapping through the order. "Same for you?"

Jimmy looked at him, then at the phone, then back at him, a tiny smile pulled again at the corner of his mouth, this one warmer.

"Yeah," Jimmy said with a faint smile, "same."

Ian nodded, still tapping.

“And garlic parmesan fries.”

Jimmy’s eyes widened a little.

“Garlic parmesan fries?”

Ian looked over with an amused faint smile.

“Yeah, they're pretty good, you want them?”

Jimmy let out a small, delighted laugh.

“I mean…*obviously*,” Jimmy said before lightly laughing.

Ian laughed too and finished the order.

“Thought so,” Ian replied with a smile.

When the food came, Jimmy looked absurdly pleased by the whole thing. He bit into one of the fries and closed his eyes for a brief second like the experience deserved reverence.

“Oh, fuck off,” Jimmy said quietly to no one in particular. “That *is* good!”

Ian laughed. By the time the second half started, Jimmy was even more invested than before, beer in hand, fries between them, yelling at the court with the confidence of a man who had apparently decided he was now responsible for the Ballers’ success. When one of the Pythons missed two free throws in a row, Jimmy sucked his teeth and said:

“He’s cracked. Look at him. He’s folded under pressure.”

Ian laughed again.

“You’ve been here two hours and now you’re an analyst?”

“I’ve got instincts.”

“You’ve got volume,” Ian responded with a smile.

“I’ve got both,” Jimmy said with a faint frown and a half smile, resulting in Ian laughing.

And somehow, in the middle of all the shouting and noise and music and light, it was easy, easy for Ian to be there with him, easy for Jimmy to be openly excited without checking himself every five seconds, easy, for once, for joy not to come with punishment attached. In the final minutes of the game, the Ballers pulled ahead for good. The stadium erupted. Jimmy shot to his feet, shouting with everyone else, clapping hard, pointing at the court, fully gone now in the thrill of the win.

“Yes! Yes, you fuckin’ beauties!”

Ian laughed and stood too, cheering with him as the buzzer sounded and the Ballers officially took it. Around them, Ballers fans roared, hugged, yelled, high-fived strangers, and Jimmy—swept right up in it—looked almost incandescent with happiness.

Even after leaving the arena, Jimmy was still talking about the game. The warm evening air hit them as they stepped out into the parking lot, the sky beginning to deepen at the edges but still bright with the last gold of the day. Palm trees moved in the breeze, the pavement still warm underfoot, and Jimmy walked beside Ian with all the excited energy of someone who'd just discovered a new corner of life and couldn't stop turning it over in his hands.

"That one play in the third quarter—did you see that?" Jimmy said with a smile, moving his hands as he talked. "When the Ballers guard cut across and stole it clean right out from under him? That was filthy. Absolutely *filthy*. And the Pythons *never* recovered after that."

Ian glanced over, smiling.

"Yeah, they got in their own heads," Ian responded.

"They did," Jimmy said at once. "That's *exactly* what happened, and then that tall bastard on the right kept tryin' to showboat, which only made it worse."

Ian laughed softly. Jimmy kept going, still full of it.

"And the crowd—*shite*, I didn't know it'd feel like that in there. When everybody starts shoutin' at once, it's like the whole *place* shakes."

Ian listened, adding a thought here and there, but mostly just let him go. There was something about Jimmy like this—lit up, animated, boyish in a way he only sometimes allowed himself to be—that made something deep and tender settle in Ian's chest. By the time they reached the car, Jimmy was still smiling. Then, just before getting in, Jimmy stopped. Ian looked over at him. Jimmy's smile shifted into something smaller, steadier. More serious.

"Thank you," Jimmy said.

Ian let out a light laugh.

"You're welcome."

But Jimmy shook his head and looked away for a moment, still wearing that faint smile, one hand resting against the top of the car.

"No," Jimmy said. "I really mean it."

That changed the air between them at once. Ian stayed quiet. Jimmy looked back at him then, and though his expression stayed composed, there was something older in it. Something that had stepped out from behind the excitement for just a second.

"When I was little," Jimmy said, "my father never took me anywhere fun."

Ian said nothing. He only watched him. Jimmy's eyes dropped briefly.

"He thought too many things were of the devil," he said, his voice flatter now. "Movies. Music. Games. Most things, really. So he never took me anywhere. Never really did much with me at all."

Jimmy gave a small, humorless laugh.

"He was too into God and religion for all that. There was no…bondin', none of it."

The parking lot noise seemed farther away for a second. Jimmy looked off toward the glowing arena behind them, then back at Ian.

"So," Jimmy said, the faint smile returning, fragile but real, "it's nice, havin' a father-figure to be able to do stuff with."

Ian's face softened immediately, and then he stepped around from the driver's side, crossed the small space between them, and pulled Jimmy into a hug.

"It's a gift," Ian said quietly, "being able to do these things with you."

Jimmy hugged him back without hesitation. Ian held him for a second, then leaned back enough to look him in the face.

"And I'm proud of you."

That made Jimmy smile again—*really* smile this time—but the softness embarrassed him too, as it always did. He faintly frowned and with a half-smile already trying to recover his usual footing.

"All right," Jimmy muttered, "don't make it all weird."

Ian laughed.

"I think that ship sailed."

Jimmy rolled his eyes, but the smile stayed.

Scene Song: "Lightning Crashes" ~ Live

By the time they got back to Jimmy's house, the last gold of the evening had softened over Pelmont, and the whole neighborhood looked warm and expensive and unreal in that only-in-Pelmont way. Jimmy got out first and glanced back at Ian as they came up the path.

"You want coffee before you go?" Jimmy asked.

Ian's face brightened a little at that.

“Yeah,” Ian replied. “I’d like that.”

Jimmy nodded and unlocked the door. They stepped inside together, the house cool and quiet after the outside heat. Jimmy headed toward the kitchen first, still faintly energized from the game, Ian following just behind him, and then Jimmy stopped dead. Ian nearly ran into him before catching himself. Jimmy didn’t move, and he didn’t speak, he only stood there, utterly still, staring into the kitchen.

Ian looked past him, and saw the man seated at the kitchen table—*Malcolm Crystal,* Jimmy’s *father*. The vicar was not in cleric's uniform, as when Jimmy last saw him. No, now Malcolm was in jeans, a shirt and a jean jacket. Malcolm sat there waiting in the quiet of the kitchen as if he belonged there, as if the sight of him shouldn't have split the room open on impact. Jimmy looked absolutely stunned.

For one impossible second, the whole room seemed to narrow and warp around the sight at the table. Malcolm Crystal sat there in the quiet of Jimmy’s kitchen, hands folded, posture straight, wearing the same grave, vicar-like composure that had once ruled Jimmy’s childhood like a curse dressed as holiness, and at once, before Malcolm even stood, Jimmy’s mind split open, he was a child again—small, *terrified,* remembering ever senseless, brutal corporal punishment he received from Malcolm, punishment that Malcolm always called “*charity*.” Jimmy remembered every act of abandonment from Malcolm. Jimmy remembered running breathless into the church with tears already blurring his eyes, his chest heaving, his little face pale with panic.

“Dad! Dad! Dad! Dad!”

The memory hit him so hard it nearly knocked him off his feet. He could see the dark wood of the church, smell the dust and old varnish, hear his own frightened voice echoing through the sanctuary as he stumbled forward toward the one person who should have turned to him, should have hugged him, consoled him, who should have said *you’re safe, I’m here, I’ve got you. Come on, let's escape together.* Malcolm rose from the chair in the kitchen and his face broke into a proud, almost emotional smile.

“*Jimmy*,” he said. “Look at you. You’re all grown up.”

Then, Malcolm looked at Jimmy with a confused and almost revolting frown. Malcolm *really* stared too—at the tiara on Jimmy's head, the gold chains, the shiny rings on Jimmy's fingers, and the tracksuit, and slowly shook his head.

“Christ almighty, what *happened* to you?” Malcolm asked.

That snapped the memory back into the present for Jimmy—but not far enough, not *nearly* far enough. Jimmy stared at him with absolute shock, the color draining out of his face, then his mouth opened.

“Da—”

The word cut off like it had burned him. Jimmy shut his eyes briefly, his face folding into a hard, disgusted frown, catching himself as if he had nearly committed some horrible crime

that he could never take back. When he opened his eyes again, the softness was gone, only coldness remained.

“Malcolm,” Jimmy said flatly, “what the fuck are you doin’ here?”

Ian, still half a step behind him, glanced from Jimmy to the man in the kitchen.

“Jimmy,” Ian said quietly, “who is that?”

Jimmy didn’t take his eyes off Malcolm. His voice came low and razor-sharp.

“*That*,” Jimmy said, “is Malcolm Crystal. The sanctimonious bastard who sired me and then picked God over his own family.”

Malcolm’s expression flickered at once, but he recovered it quickly.

“I’ve been looking for you,” Malcolm said, “all over the afterlife. I’ve been trying to find you.”

Then he took one step toward Jimmy. That one step was all it took. Jimmy moved backward immediately, quick and involuntary, retreating toward Ian as though his body had already made the decision before his mind could. Tears sprang into Jimmy’s eyes with humiliating speed. His breathing shifted. His hands twitched once at his sides, and in a voice gone tight with sudden panic and rage, Jimmy said:

“*Don’t* you fuckin’ *touch* me.”

Malcolm frowned, confused.

“Why are you angry with me?” Malcolm asked.

Jimmy’s face changed so violently it was almost frightening. His brows raised and his eyes widened. His mouth parted. Rage lit through him so fast it seemed to burn the air.

“Angry with you?” Jimmy repeated.

Then Jimmy let out one stunned, disbelieving laugh that broke halfway through.

“No. No, I’m not angry with you, Malcolm.”

Jimmy’s voice rose.

“I fuckin’ *hate* you.”

Ian stayed where he was, silent now, watching. Malcolm sighed with a roll of his eyes.

“Jimmy—”

But Jimmy was already shouting.

“When I was *eight*!” Jimmy snapped, his voice cracking with sudden force, “when the virus took hold down on Earth, I *ran* to you *cryin’* and beggin’ for *help*!”

Tears spilled over now, but Jimmy didn’t wipe them away, he was too far gone.

“You pushed me aside for a God who couldn’t punch his way out of a fuckin’ paper *bag*!”

Malcolm’s face hardened.

“Jimmy—”

“*No*!”

Jimmy pointed at him with a shaking hand, every word coming louder now, more jagged, more torn, straight out of something festering and old.

“You *abandoned* me! You—you led a bunch of fuckin’ infected *demons* on the charge to *fuck* knows where while I was left terrified and *alone*!”

Malcolm’s eyes shifted then, cutting past Jimmy’s shoulder toward Ian. His tone cooled.

“Jimny, this is a family matter,” Malcolm said. “Perhaps the man behind you should leave, and we can discuss this in private.”

Ian looked immediately at Jimmy, solemn and concerned.

“Maybe I *should* go,” Ian said softly, “give you both some time—”

But Jimmy whirled on that so fast it was almost a snarl.

“Dad, *no*!”

Ian stopped, not just physically—*everything* in him stopped. For a single, suspended second, the word didn’t register as language. It hit him deeper than that—somewhere instinctive, somewhere old. Something in his chest tightened sharply, almost painfully, as if the word had reached inside him and *taken hold of something that had been quietly waiting to be claimed*. *Dad.* Jimmy’s chest was heaving now.

“Don’t you go *anywhere*!” Jimmy said, his tearful voice rough and rising again. “You stay *right* fuckin’ here!”

Ian didn’t move, he couldn’t—not because he was unsure, but because something in him had just *locked into place*. He had heard Jimmy call him a lot of things—his name, jokes, sarcasm, the occasional half-serious jab—but *not that,* not *“Dad*,” and not like this, not torn out of him, not in fear, not in need, and the way Jimmy said it—raw, panicked, desperate—told Ian everything he needed to understand in one brutal instant: this wasn’t a title, this was a *lifeline.* Ian’s gaze shifted to Jimmy, really seeing him now—not the loud, swaggering, untouchable version of him, but the one underneath. The one shaking. The one backing up without meaning to. The one who had just reached for him the same way a frightened child would reach for the one person they trusted to keep them safe. Something in Ian’s chest broke

open—and right behind it, something else rose to meet it: protectiveness, immediate, *absolute*, the kind that didn't ask permission, the kind that didn't step aside. So when Malcolm spoke—

"Dad?" Malcolm said. "Jimmy, he's not your father."

—Ian didn't even look at him, because by then, Malcolm didn't matter. Jimmy rounded on Malcolm so sharply it looked like it hurt.

"Yes, he is!" Jimmy shouted.

The words cracked through the room like a gunshot. Ian felt them land in his chest—heavy, real, undeniable, and with them came something else—not pride, not exactly, but something quieter and deeper—*responsibility, n*ot forced onto him, but chosen, accepted, fully. Jimmy was shaking now, his face red, tears streaming unchecked.

"Yes, he is!" Jimmy shouted again. "He's been more of a father to me than you ever were!"

Ian's jaw tightened slightly—not at Jimmy, but at the man in front of them. He could see it now, plain as day, the damage Malcolm had done, not in theory, not in memory, but *alive* in the way Jimmy's body reacted. The flinch. The retreat. The panic that came too fast to control, and that—more than anything—made something cold settle under Ian's ribs. Ian shifted forward half a step, not aggressively, not loudly, but deliberately—placing himself just slightly closer to Jimmy, just slightly more between him and Malcolm, a quiet, unmistakable line.

If Malcolm noticed, he didn't acknowledge it. But Ian didn't need him to; he wasn't doing it for Malcolm, he was doing it for Jimmy. Jimmy took a step forward now, no longer backing away. His fear had transmuted fully into fury.

"He took me to my first basketball game today!" Jimmy shouted. "He *listens* to me! He *talks* to me! He gives a damn whether I'm all *right*! He *does* things with me because he *wants* to! He's *proud* of me!"

Ian's throat tightened at that, not visibly, but enough. Because every word Jimmy was throwing like a weapon—every example, every moment—Ian recognized them for what they really were: *proof, p*roof that it hadn't been nothing, proof that it had mattered, proof that Jimmy had been paying attention, and underneath all of it, Ian could hear what Jimmy wasn't saying out loud: *You stayed, you showed up, you chose me.* Jimmy laughed once, harshly, bitterly, tears still pouring.

"Do you know what that feels like? Do you?" Jimmy asked Malcolm.

Ian just stayed exactly where he was—solid, steady, present—his eyes on Jimmy, not Malcolm, not the conflict, just Jimmy, because right now, that was the only thing that mattered. And if Jimmy needed someone to stand there—*not leave, not back off, not hand him back to the man who broke him*—then Ian was not going anywhere, not now, not for anything. Malcolm's jaw tightened.

“Jimmy, you're not being fair. I did what I believed was right.”

Jimmy’s expression twisted.

“For *who*?”

“For *God*,” Malcolm said, his own voice starting to rise now. “For salvation. For the *truth*.”

Jimmy barked out a broken laugh as more tears clouded his eyes.

“There it is!” Jimmy said with a contrived smile. “There it *fuckin*’ is! *Always* God. *Always* your truth. *Always* your righteous little fuckin’ mission. *Never me*!”

“I was trying to save *souls*, Jimmy!” Malcolm shot back.

“You couldn’t even save your own *son*!” Jimmy yelled.

That landed as Malcolm flinched. The kitchen went very still for one beat. Jimmy took another step closer, tears streaming, his voice now rough with the kind of pain that had long ago stopped trying to look dignified.

“When I came into that church,” Jimmy said, lower now, but somehow more devastating, “I was a little boy, a *child*. I was scared. I thought my mum and my sisters might have already been *dead*.”

Jimmy’s voice broke hard on the last word. He frowned and his lips slightly trembled as he fought to hold back the sobs he felt coming.

“And you looked right *through* me.”

Malcolm opened his mouth, but Jimmy wouldn’t let him speak.

“Do you know what that *did* to me?” Jimmy said tearfully and softly. “Do you have any idea what it did to me to know, at eight years old, that when the world ended, my own father chose his fuckin’ *God* over *me*?”

Malcolm’s expression shifted from pride to discomfort to defensiveness all at once.

“I was a servant of the Lord—”

Jimmy lunged forward with a furious, incredulous shout.

“And I was your *son*!”

The force of it rang through the kitchen. Ian stayed silent, his face stricken now, watching the whole thing like a man witnessing a wound tear fully open. Malcolm’s own voice rose then, less sure, more strained.

“You don’t understand the burden I was under, Jimmy! I—”

Jimmy, laughing bitterly, cut Malcolm off.

“No, I understand it fuckin’ perfectly! I understand that you loved being important to your fuckin' god more than you loved being my father!”

“Jimmy, that’s not true—”

“It *is* true!” Jimmy shouted.

Malcolm stepped forward again, frustrated now, trying to reach him with reason, with authority, with whatever old power he thought he still carried.

“Look—I came here to mend things with you.”

Jimmy stared at him in utter disbelief, like the words themselves didn’t make sense in the same room as the man who had spoken them.

“Mend things?” Jimmy said, his voice breaking under the weight of it.

Malcolm held his gaze, steady, assured.

“Yes.”

Jimmy shook his head slowly, tears still falling, his face going almost eerily blank—not calm, not resolved, but emptied out by a rage so deep it had burned through everything softer.

“No,” Jimmy said. “No, there is nothing to mend.”

“Jimmy—”

“*No*!”

The word cracked through the room, and for a moment, there was silence. Then Malcolm’s expression shifted—subtle, but unmistakable. The softness, the appeal, the attempt at reconciliation—it all tightened, sharpened, hardened into something colder. Something older, something familiar, his voice came back different this time—firm, authoritative, the voice of a man who had never truly believed his authority could be denied.

“*Jimmy*,” Malcolm said, each syllable measured, “I’m *still* your *father*.

Malcolm took a small step forward—not aggressive, but claiming space.

“And you *will obey* me—”

Malcolm paused, just long enough for the weight of it to settle.

“For your own good,” Malcolm continued, “you *will* obey me, or I *swear*—”

Malcolm didn’t finish the sentence, he didn’t need to. The threat hung there, heavy, unfinished, far more dangerous for what it implied than what it said. And *that*—that was the moment that Jimmy’s entire body went rigid, not gradually but instantly, like something had snapped into place inside him. Jimmy’s brows shot up first, sharp with disbelief, and then his

eyes narrowed, locking onto Malcolm with a look that was no longer just anger—it was *shock*, real shock.

The kind that came from watching something you thought was dead suddenly breathe again. For a split second, Jimmy didn't even move, he didn't blink, he didn't even breathe. Because Malcolm hadn't just spoken—he had *reverted,* he had reverted *b*ack into the man who *commanded*, who threatened with *violence*, who expected and demanded obedience as naturally as breathing. And here—in Jimmy's own *house*, in *this* life. After everything—Malcolm had the audacity to try it again. Jimmy's jaw tightened hard enough to tremble. The tears didn't stop, but something else rose up behind them now—something hotter, sharper, far less wounded, and when Jimmy finally moved, it wasn't back. It was forward.

"Get out," Jimmy said with terrifying calm.

Malcolm frowned.

"No, I'm not leaving like this, Jimmy."

Jimmy stepped closer.

"*Get out*," Jimmy said in a menacing tone.

"No!" Malcolm shouted. "I didn't come all this way for you to throw a tantrum and send me —"

Malcolm stopped as Jimmy grabbed him. It happened so fast Ian barely moved before it was already done. Jimmy seized Malcolm by the arm and shoulder with shocking force and started dragging him toward the door. Malcolm stumbled, trying to resist.

"Jimmy!" Malcolm yelled.

"Get out!" Jimmy shouted.

Jimmy hauled him across the kitchen, past the island, into the hall with all the wild, shaking strength of a man who had been carrying this exact moment in his body for decades.

"Get the *fuck* out of my house!"

Malcolm tried to brace himself.

"Listen to me!" Malcolm shouted.

"No!"

Jimmy shoved him hard at the door, quickly yanked it open, and all but threw him out onto the porch.

"Get out!" Jimmy shouted again, fully undone now, his voice ringing with pure hurt and hatred. "Get the fuck out!"

Malcolm turned once, stunned and furious and still trying, unbelievably, to salvage his dignity. But Jimmy slammed the door in his face so hard the whole house shook. Then silence, not true silence, the kind full of breathing. Jimmy stood there in the entryway for half a second, chest heaving, face red, hands trembling violently at his sides. Then he turned and started pacing, one direction, then the other, then back again. Jimmy's fingers curled and uncurled. His mouth was tight and trembling. His whole body looked like it had become too small to contain what was moving through it. Ian watched for a moment, then stepped carefully closer.

"Jimmy," he said softly. "Are you okay?"

Jimmy stopped mid-pace with his back to him, and for one second, he said nothing. Then, in a voice already shaking apart, he said:

"Just leave me alone tonight."

Ian's face fell.

"Jimmy—"

"I need the night alone to think."

Jimmy's voice cracked harder, then, softer—softer than Ian had heard it in a long time—Jimmy said:

"*Please*."

That changed everything. Ian stood still for another beat, disappointment and concern moving openly across his face, but he understood what that word had cost. So he nodded once.

"All right," Ian said softly. "I'll go."

Jimmy didn't turn around. Ian looked at him one last time, then went for the door and left as softly as he could. When the door shut, Jimmy was alone, and whatever had been holding him together went with Ian. He rushed back into the kitchen like he was fleeing something still inside his own skin, reached the table, and gripped the edge of it hard before collapsing into the chair. Then he bent forward and dropped his face into his hands. His shoulders shook once, twice. He squeezed his eyes shut so hard it hurt, and immediately the memory came again, not as thought, not as recollection, as experience. He was eight years old again, running into the church, crying so hard his words tangled together:

"Dad! Dad! Dad! Dad! What's happening? I'm so scared, Dad! I think my mum and sis might be dead!"

The terror in that child's voice rang through him like it had never stopped. In the kitchen, Jimmy let out a strangled sound and pressed his palms harder into his eyes as though he could physically block the past from getting in, but Pelmont did not erase memory. It only stripped away the lies around it, and the truth, when it came, was unbearable.

That little boy had run to his father in the most frightened moment of his life, and his father didn't even choose him. Jimmy’s hands began to shake harder. His breathing broke. Then, alone in the kitchen with the bright summer evening fading outside and the ghost of his eight-year-old self still crying in his head, Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal finally did what he had not allowed himself to do while Malcolm stood in front of him. He *broke*. A raw, torn sob ripped out of him, ugly and helpless and young.

He dropped his head into his arms on the table while sobs spilled hot. And in the echoing chambers of his memory, the child he had been kept calling for a father who never came.

Chapter 2

Scene Song: "Somebody I Used To Know" ~ Gotye

Headed to Sasha's house, Jimmy didn't knock. He unlocked her door and came right through like a storm had learned how to walk upright, his face blotched red around the eyes, the rims of them still wet, his breathing too sharp to be called steady. He moved fast, not with purpose exactly, but with the restless, breaking momentum of someone who had run on fury and grief until both had started eating through the same place in him. In Sasha's living room, the television glowed warmly with a scene from the 2011 film *Jumping the Broom*, and Sasha, Remmick, Annie, Smoke, Stack, Mary, and Delta Slim had all been scattered around the room in varying states of comfort, laughing at the movie and throwing in commentary of their own. That ended the second Jimmy stepped in front of the television, picked up the remote and pressed pause on the television. The room dropped into stunned silence. Smoke sat forward immediately with an annoyed frown.

"Man, what the fuck you do that for?" Smoke snapped. "Give me that damn remote."

Jimmy ignored him. His voice came out trembling and rough.

"I need to talk to all of you."

Jimmy took one breath that did not help him at all.

"*Now,*" Jimmy added.

That changed the room. Sasha was on her feet before anyone else could move. One look at Jimmy's face and she already knew. Not what had happened yet, but that something had, and that it was bad. She crossed to him slowly, delicately, as if one wrong note might splinter him further.

"What's wrong?" she asked softly.

Jimmy looked away. Then he shut his eyes tight, his mouth folding into a deep, pained frown as he fought with *everything* he had not to let what was already climbing his throat break loose in front of all of them. However, it did. His face crumpled. A sob tore out of him, strangled and furious at itself. Sasha's expression changed instantly.

"Jimmy, what happened—"

Jimmy shook his head hard once, tears spilling.

"He's here," Jimmy said, his voice shredded, "he's fuckin' here."

Sasha frowned.

“Who?”

Jimmy laughed once, harshly, without humor, and wiped at his face with the heel of his hand.

“Malcolm,” Jimmy said in a tone so full of hatred it made the name sound contaminated, “that fuckin’ bastard, my father.”

Remmick was on his feet now too, concern already cutting into his features.

“What?” Remmick asked.

Jimmy drew in a shaky breath and started talking—not in clean order, not at first, but in the only order grief and rage would allow. He told them about the basketball game with Ian, coming home, inviting Ian in for coffee, walking into the kitchen and seeing Malcolm at the table. The memory hitting him. Malcolm smiling like he had any right to, Malcolm saying he’d been looking for him, Malcolm stepping toward him, Malcolm asking why he was angry, Malcolm wanting Ian to leave, Malcolm daring to say Ian was not his father, and Malcolm commanding obedience with the threat of violence. By the time Jimmy got to that part, his voice had gone sharp again.

“Then he stood there,” Jimmy said, breathing hard, “and had the fuckin’ *nerve* to act confused! *Confused*! Like—like he didn’t know exactly what he *did*!”

No one in the room interrupted, not even Smoke. Jimmy’s hands were shaking again.

“I told him I hated him,” Jimmy said, and this time his voice dropped, went raw and scraped out. “I told him what happened. I told him what he did to me, and he still acted like we had somethin’ to talk about.”

Jimmy’s eyes flashed, wet and furious.

“I don’t *want* him here!” Jimmy shouted tearfully. “I don’t want him in Pelmont! He’s got no fuckin’ right to *be* here after what he did! *No* right! And I don’t know what kind of sick, delusional nerve he’s got, showin’ his fuckin’ face to me after all that—”

Jimmy stopped because footsteps sounded behind him. Everyone in the room, including Jimmy, turned around. Malcolm stood in the living room doorway. He had followed Jimmy, of course he had. Malcolm looked from Jimmy to the room full of strangers and family alike, then settled his gaze back on Jimmy.

“We need to talk,” Malcolm said.

Hearing Malcolm's first word of “we” made Jimmy take one immediate step backward. It was pure fearful instinct. *Fast*. *Thoughtless*. The same involuntary recoil as earlier, and *this* time, everyone in the room *saw* it. Jimmy shook his head once.

“We have nothin’ to talk about,” Jimmy said, his voice low and breaking. “Get out.”

Sasha stared at Malcolm, her face going cold at once.

“How the hell did you get in my house?”

Malcolm answered like nothing about this was absurd.

“The door was open. I followed Jimmy over and came in.”

The disbelief that passed through the room was immediate.

“The fuck?” Smoke muttered with a frown.

Malcolm took another step forward.

“Jimmy,” Malcolm said, his voice tightening now, “this can’t be settled by shouting. We need to speak privately, *now*.”

Jimmy backed up again, another half-step, shaking his head while wiping more streaming tears away.

“*No*! Get out and leave me alone!”

But before Malcolm could take another step, Smoke rose from the sofa, not quickly, not theatrically, just with that controlled, dangerous stillness that meant the temperature in the room had changed and anybody with sense ought to know it.

“*Leave*,” Smoke said.

Malcolm stopped and looked at him, irritation creasing his face as if he could not believe he was being addressed at all.

“I’m not *talking* to you,” Malcolm said coldly. “I’m *talking* to my son. So stay *out* of this.”

Smoke’s expression did not change. That look—that cold disgust that Malcolm was giving him, that instant attempt to rank and dismiss him—was familiar to Smoke. He had seen it in white men like Hogwood, seen it in the easy righteousness of people who thought breeding and title and God gave them the right to look through other men as if they were furniture. Smoke took one step forward.

“I don’t give a damn who you talkin’ to. You fuckin’ *heard* me,” Smoke said, “*leave*.”

Malcolm opened his mouth. Then Remmick moved too. He stepped up beside Smoke, and where Smoke was steady fire, Remmick was something *colder*, *sharper*. The kind of danger that didn’t need volume to be believed.

“You need to get the hell out,” Remmick said.

Malcolm looked from one to the other with naked contempt.

“And who exactly are you meant to be?”

Remmick’s eyes narrowed.

“The one *tellin’* you to get the hell out of here before this gets uglier.”

Smoke didn’t take his eyes off Malcolm.

“You wanna get to Jimmy,” Smoke said, his voice low and flat, “you gotta get through us.”

There was no bravado in Smoke’s words; that was what made it dangerous.

Remmick took another half-step, enough to put himself fully between Malcolm and Jimmy.

“And there ain’t no way in hell that’s happenin’,” Remmick said, “not on my watch.”

Malcolm’s jaw tightened. He glanced between them, then toward Jimmy beyond them, visibly struggling between indignation and the sudden realization that he was no longer dealing with a frightened little boy cornered in a church. He was looking at a roomful of people who were not going to let him near Jimmy. Still, Malcolm's pride made him reckless.

“This is between me and my *son*!” Malcolm shouted.

“*No*!” Sasha shouted sharply. “It stopped being just between you and Jimmy the second you walked into my house like you had any right! Who in the *hell* do you think you *are* just *waltzing* your crazy Jesus freak ass up in here?!”

Annie stood now too, her face hard. Mary, who had been silent so far, folded her arms with a look of pure disdain. Delta Slim gave a low hum through his nose and leaned back in his chair, but his eyes were fixed on Malcolm with no warmth in them at all. Stack rose more slowly than the others, but when he did, the whole room altered again. He didn’t come forward like Smoke and Remmick. He just stood there loose and ready, the way dangerous men often did when they knew they wouldn't need to move first. Malcolm saw all of it, and for the first time since walking into the room, uncertainty flickered. Still, he looked at Jimmy over their shoulders and said:

“This isn’t over, Jimmy.”

Jimmy sucked his teeth, rolled his tearful eyes and then shook his head. For one second, Malcolm said nothing else. Then he looked away. That alone felt like something. His face shut down into offended dignity, and with one last look of cold disdain at the room, he turned and walked out. No one moved until they heard the front door close. Only then did the tension in the room break enough to breathe through. Jimmy stood very still, too still. Sasha, slowly this time, put a careful hand on his arm and he flinched, not away from her exactly, but just from the aftermath still moving too hard through him.

“Hey,” she said softly. “It’s all right, he’s gone.”

With a brief close of his eyes, Jimmy let out a breath that came apart halfway through. Then, all at once, he quickly grabbed Sasha's arm tightly as his knees seemed to lose some of their certainty. Remmick caught it immediately—not physically, but just by stepping close enough to steady the room around him.

“You all right?” Remmick asked.

Jimmy's breath hitched as he shook his head.

"No."

That honesty silenced everybody. Smoke turned toward the coffee table and, without a word, grabbed the remote and turned the television off, killing the still-frozen frame from the movie so the room could be fully present with him. Sasha moved in front of Jimmy and looked up at him, her eyes soft.

"You want to sit down?" Sasha asked.

Jimmy shook his head, then nodded. Then looked angry at himself for not being able to decide something so basic.

"Come on," Annie said gently before getting up, walking over to him, taking his hand, and leading him to the sofa to sit down.

It was the kind of invitation given to someone who looked like they'd forgotten what to do with their own body. Something in Jimmy's face changed, not better, not fixed, just less alone. Jimmy sat down, not elegantly, not with any of his usual dramatic self-command, but heavily, like his bones had been carrying too much for too long and had finally decided to confess it. Sasha sat beside him, and for a second, no one spoke. Then Jimmy said, in a voice barely above a rasp:

"I didn't know where else to go."

Sasha's whole face softened.

"You came to the right place," she said.

Smoke spoke next, and his voice was blunt as ever, but lower now, less steel, more ground beneath your feet.

"He come around again, he ain't getting anywhere near you."

Jimmy looked up and Smoke held his gaze, almost as if there was hope in his eyes that Smoke was being genuine.

"I mean it," Smoke added.

Remmick nodded once beside him.

"Yeah, Remmick said, "Smoke and I can stay with you tonight, in case he decides to show up again."

Smoke nodded. Delta Slim leaned forward and muttered:

"I tell you this, if that preacher had stayed one minute longer, I'd have beat his sanctified ass clean back through the door."

That earned a real weak breath of laughter from Mary, which helped the room more than anyone said. Annie reached over and touched Jimmy's knee once, briefly.

"You don't owe him a damn thing, Jimmy, remember that if he comes around again," Annie said.

Jimmy stared at the floor, then, after a long beat, nodded. Outside, the summer evening still glowed warm and orange over Pelmont, palm shadows stretched long against the windows, and the room slowly began to breathe again around him. But even after Malcolm was gone, the hurt he had stirred stayed in the air. And everybody in that living room knew the same thing: Jimmy had survived the confrontation. However, that didn't mean he had come through it uncut. So no one rushed him. No one pushed; they just stayed, and for that night, that was enough.

Scene Song: "My December" ~ Linkin Park

The next day came gray into Jimmy's spirit, even if Pelmont refused to look anything but beautiful. Outside, Pelmont still glittered under another bright summer sky. The palms still swayed. The sea still flashed silver-blue beyond the roads. The sun still lay its warmth over everything as though nothing painful had happened the night before, as though fathers did not fail sons, as though old wounds did not reopen simply because a man walked back into a kitchen and smiled like history could be revised by wanting it to. Jimmy barely saw any of it. By the time he reached Ian's house, the brightness of the morning felt almost offensive.

He stood on the porch for a long second after knocking, tracksuit jacket half-zipped, tiara absent today, as though even that familiar armor had felt like too much. His face carried the remains of the previous night in soft but unmistakable ways—faint swelling around the eyes, a rawness at the edges of them, the kind of emotional wear that no amount of washing your face could properly hide. From a lack of sleep, he looked not disheveled exactly, but stripped down somehow. Less arranged. Less defended. When the door opened, Ian took one look at him and something in his own face softened immediately.

Jimmy stood there with his mouth slightly parted, his shoulders held with the awkward stiffness of a man who had come over because he had to, but had not fully sorted out what he was going to say once the door opened. He looked half guilty, half conflicted, and threaded through both was something younger and more fragile than either. Ian stepped aside at once.

"Come in."

Jimmy nodded once and entered without a word. They moved into the kitchen quietly, the house still carrying that clean morning hush of a place not yet fully occupied by the day. Light spilled through the windows in pale gold sheets, touching the countertops, the table, the backs of the chairs. Somewhere outside, gulls cried in the distance, and the sound floated

faintly through the open part of the kitchen window. It should have been peaceful. Instead, the room felt like it was waiting. Ian motioned lightly toward the table.

Jimmy sat, but not fully at ease. He lowered himself into the chair with that restless incompleteness he had when he felt cornered by emotion—back not quite touching the chair, shoulders slightly hunched, one hand rubbing over the rings on the other as though he needed some small physical distraction to keep himself from unraveling before he meant to. Ian remained standing for a moment, then sat across from him. For a few seconds, neither of them spoke. Then Ian asked, carefully:

“Have you talked to Malcolm?”

Jimmy’s eyes dropped at once, and then he shook his head slowly.

“No.”

Jimmy’s voice came out low and dejected, roughened by what he had cried out the night before and by what still sat lodged in him now. He didn’t look at Ian for more than a second at a time, and even those brief glances felt accidental, as if he could not quite bear sustained eye contact while being this near whatever truth he had come there to speak.

“I haven’t,” Jimmy said, quieter, “and I don’t want to.”

Ian nodded once, but the thought that had clearly been sitting with him since the night before still had to be said.

“Maybe you should.”

Jimmy’s head lifted just slightly. Ian kept his voice even.

“It’s clear he wants to patch things up with you, so maybe you two should.”

There was nothing sharp in the words, nothing forceful, nothing even truly persuasive. If anything, they sounded like they had been made to pass through reluctance on their way out. Jimmy looked up fully now, not with anger at first, but with confusion. A small deep frown pulled between his brows, and he stared at Ian for several long seconds in complete silence, as if trying to understand not only the sentence itself, but the wound he suddenly felt opening under it. Then Jimmy asked, very quietly:

“Why are you pushing me away?”

Ian blinked.

“Jimmy, I’m not—”

But Jimmy had already moved ahead of him, the question widening before he could stop it. Jimmy’s face changed with frightening speed. The confusion turned to hurt, and the hurt was so naked that it made him look younger all at once. Not softened exactly. Not made innocent. Just stripped back to some rawer truth beneath the swagger and profanity and cultivated attitude.

“Do you not want to be my father anymore?” Jimmy asked.

Ian stared at him. For one suspended second, he truly did not know how to answer because the question hadn’t come from the man sitting in front of him so much as from the child still living inside him. Before Ian could speak, Jimmy looked away, and Ian saw the tears rise in his eyes almost instantly, bright and humiliating and impossible for Jimmy to fully contain once they started. Jimmy frowned hard, as if trying to force them back through sheer anger. Then, after a few beats, he looked back at Ian and said, in a voice already breaking:

“I can’t take being abandoned twice.”

The sentence hit the room with the full force of a confession never meant to be spoken out loud, not because it was dramatic, but because it *wasn’t*, because the wording of it was so simple, so *young*. There was nothing guarded in it, none of Jimmy’s usual jagged wit or obscenity or performance. It came out with the plain, terrible honesty of a little boy trying to name the shape of his fear before it swallowed him whole. Ian felt his own chest tighten. Jimmy kept going because once a wound like that opened, it didn’t stop just because dignity begged it to. Jimmy swallowed hard, his face turned partly away as if he wanted to hide and be heard at the same time.

“I don’t want to see Malcolm,” Jimmy said. “I *don’t*.”

Then softer still, almost ashamed of the truth even as he said it, Jimmy said:

“I don’t *want* him as my father.”

His voice thinned, and when he said the next words, they came out almost quietly, like something a child would whisper because speaking it too loudly might make it impossible.

“I want you,” Jimmy added.

Ian did not move. Jimmy’s tears were falling freely now, his mouth trembling around the effort not to cry any harder than he already was.

“I want *you* as my father,” Jimmy said.

And then Jimmy broke. He turned his face away and bowed his head slightly, shoulders caving inward, trying once again to fight back the sobs and failing at it almost immediately. The sound of him trying not to cry was somehow worse than the crying itself—caught, shaken, furious at its own existence, the kind of grief that seemed embarrassed to need anything while needing everything. That undid Ian completely. Ian stood and went around the table to him. Jimmy didn’t resist when Ian reached down and cupped his face in both hands, lifting it gently but firmly until Jimmy had no choice but to look at him. Tears clung to Jimmy’s lashes. His eyes were red-rimmed, wounded, searching Ian’s face with the frightened intensity of someone waiting to hear whether his world was about to hold or come apart. Ian held his face carefully, thumbs resting at his jaw, and said with quiet firmness:

“If that’s what you want, then that’s what I want too.”

Jimmy stared at him. Ian's expression softened even more, but his voice stayed steady, grounded, sure.

"I didn't stop looking at you as my son last night," Ian said, "not for one second, and I *still* haven't this morning."

Jimmy's face twitched with the effort not to cry harder. Ian went on.

"But I was worried you might feel differently. I thought maybe…with Malcolm here…"

Ian paused, then gave the smallest shake of his head.

"I wanted to give you room in case that changed something for you," Ian added.

Jimmy shook his head immediately.

"No," Jimmy said almost quietly.

The answer was instant, firm despite the tears, *absolute*. Jimmy looked down for a second, then back up, his face tightening with anger now—not at Ian, never at Ian, but at the man whose existence had forced this terror out of him in the first place.

"*No*," Jimmy said again, stronger. "It *didn't*."

Jimmy drew in a shaky breath, then, with a heat that put iron back into his voice, he said:

"I don't *want* Malcolm as my father."

Ian's mouth softened into the faintest warm smile and he nodded once.

"Okay."

That one word did more than argument or reassurance could have. It landed not as permission, but as acceptance. As a door opening and staying open. Jimmy's face crumpled again—not with fresh hurt this time, but with relief so sharp it hurt almost the same. Ian pulled him into a hug and Jimmy went into it instantly, no hesitation, no irony, no performance. He folded into Ian like a man who had spent the last twenty-four hours trying not to become that traumatized eight-year-old boy again and had failed so completely that now there was no point pretending otherwise. Ian held him tightly, one hand at the back of his head, the other spread firm between his shoulder blades.

And there, in the warm light of the kitchen, while the sea wind moved softly at the window and Pelmont kept shining on outside as if healing were simple, Jimmy, in his father's arms and let himself be held, no scripture, no duty, no abandonment dressed as righteousness, just being held, just chosen. Jimmy's eyes squeezed shut and when he finally spoke, his voice was muffled against Ian's shoulder.

"I didn't know if you still wanted me as your son."

"There was never any doubt for me," Ian said with a faint frown.

That did it. Jimmy gave one broken exhale that was almost a sob and almost a laugh and not fully either, and Ian closed his eyes briefly too, feeling the full weight of what had nearly been lost to fear. They stayed like that for a long moment, not rushed, not filled with extra words, neither of them needing to dilute the truth with too much language.

When they finally eased apart, Ian kept one hand at Jimmy's shoulder and looked at him closely. Jimmy still looked wrung out, but something had changed, not healed, not fixed, but steadied, as though the floor under him had stopped shifting. Ian brushed one thumb briefly beneath Jimmy's eye, catching the remains of a tear there with a gentleness so ordinary it almost hurt. Then Ian smiled, very faintly.

"Coffee?" Ian asked.

And for the first time since he had walked in, a ghost of Jimmy's usual self moved into him as he faintly and briefly smiled.

"Yeah," Jimmy said hoarsely, "coffee sounds good."

Ian nodded and moved toward the counter. Behind him, Jimmy sat still for one extra second, then he got up and followed, and the kitchen, which had begun the conversation full of fear, slowly filled instead with the quiet sounds of water running, mugs being set down, and two people moving around each other, no longer afraid of what to call themselves.

Scene Song: "Father of Mine" ~ Everclear

Later that day, Jimmy waited in his kitchen like a man awaiting an execution. The summer light outside remained offensively beautiful, pouring gold across Pelmont with all the bright, thoughtless splendor Pelmont always seemed to insist upon. The palms swayed. The sea flashed beyond the windows. The air carried warmth and salt and peace. Inside Jimmy's house, there was none. He paced the length of the kitchen in one of his tracksuits, his chains glinting cold on his chest, his rings flashing every time he turned sharply at the island and paced back the other way. His tiara sat on his head like a crown worn to war. His face had settled into something hard and dangerously still between movements, but the energy in him had not. It stalked under his skin. It moved in the set of his jaw, in the flex of his fingers, in the rhythm of his pacing.

He had told Ian he didn't *want* to see Malcolm; that had been true, but there was another truth beneath it. He *needed* to see Malcolm. Jimmy needed to stand in front of him one final time and say everything that had been festering in him all these years, everything that had clawed at the inside of his ribs and twisted his mind. He didn't want reconciliation. He didn't want to accept forgiveness from Malcolm. He didn't want a second chance with the man. He wanted *closure*, and if closure had to come dressed as exile and threat, so be it. So he paced and waited. When the first knock came at the kitchen door, Jimmy was moving before the sound had fully died. He crossed the floor fast, yanked the door open—and there stood Malcolm.

Malcolm wore the kind of hopeful smile that made Jimmy instantly want to break something.

It was small, measured, meant to deceptively look humble and earnest, but to Jimmy it only looked ridiculous. Rehearsed. Self-important. A man arriving at the site of his own absolution and already assuming it might be granted. Jimmy stared at him, slowly, *coldly*. Jimmy looked Malcolm up and down like he was measuring the weight of a body before deciding whether it was worth the effort of dragging. Then Jimmy stepped aside and gestured with one ringed hand.

"Get in."

Malcolm entered. Jimmy shut the door behind him. For a moment, neither man moved much beyond that. Then Malcolm walked over and stood near the table, trying to compose his face into something fatherly, something sober and regretful. Jimmy leaned against the island, one arm across his chest, while his other hand curled against his chin, his head slightly bowed. He didn't look sad. He didn't look frightened. He looked like a man listening with a knife in his pocket. Malcolm began almost at once.

"Jimmy," Malcolm said, his voice grave, "I've had time to reflect, a great deal of time. I wanted to come to you and say that I can see now I was misguided. I thought I was doing God's work. I thought I was serving a greater truth."

Jimmy said nothing. Malcolm went on, encouraged by the silence in the worst possible way.

"I know there were things I did, ways I behaved, burdens I placed upon you as a child, that in retrospect came from my own zeal. My own conviction. I was a man under immense spiritual pressure."

Jimmy's eyes stayed on the floor. His expression didn't change. Malcolm continued rambling, circling himself the way narcissists always did when trying to sound repentant without ever arriving at actual guilt.

"I believed severe discipline was necessary. I believed the Lord demanded obedience. I believed the times we were living through called for severity. If I disciplined you too brutally and too hard, if I was…overzealous…it was because I feared damnation. I feared what would happen if I failed in my duty as a servant of God."

Still Jimmy said nothing. Malcolm shifted his weight and kept talking.

"I can see now that I may have put too much emphasis on judgment. On righteousness. On preparing for what I believed was coming. And perhaps, in doing so, I failed to make room for tenderness, for earthly affection, for…"

Malcolm trailed off just long enough to search for a word flattering enough to himself.

"…for balance."

Jimmy's fingers moved once against his chin. That was all. Malcolm kept going.

“When the end came, when all of that horror overtook the earth, I truly believed I was acting according to divine command. I was trying to lead souls. I was trying to fulfill something sacred. I—*maybe* made you feel abandoned, I get it.”

Abandoned, that word finally made Jimmy’s eyes flick up, not fully, but just enough. Malcolm, tragically, mistook even that for an opening.

“You have to understand though,” Malcolm said, “I was a man consumed by purpose. By calling. By faith. I see now that I might have made mistakes, yes, but I thought it was necessary, but it’s over now and it wasn’t as if what I did was—that bad. I mean, you felt as if you were abandoned, but you got over it, I’m sure.”

Silence, then more silence. Malcolm finally stopped talking. He looked at Jimmy and waited, apparently expecting some kind of emotional movement, some crack, some tremor that meant his long self-exoneration had found purchase. Jimmy slowly lifted his head. His eyes settled on Malcolm at last. A brow rose. His mouth curled into that faint, dangerous little smile—the one that never meant warmth, only that something cruel and precise had arrived in him and was ready to speak.

“Are you done?” Jimmy asked.

Malcolm blinked, thrown by the tone, then he nodded once.

“Yes.”

Jimmy nodded too, once, and rolled his eyes with that same small smile still hanging at the corner of his mouth. He looked away for one second, as if collecting himself. Then he swallowed hard, looked back at Malcolm, and began.

“*You*,” Jimmy said, very evenly, “You’re the reason why some days I can’t decide whether I’m going to mentally remain thirty-six or whether I’m going to go back to being eight years old again.”

Malcolm’s face shifted. Jimmy went on.

“You’re the reason for the rings on my fuckin’ fingers, the tiara, the fuckin’ tracksuits, the chains. You’re the reason I live life so aggressively in *every* fuckin’ way that it’s become abnormal.”

Jimmy’s voice never rose; that was what made it dangerous.

“You’re the reason I don’t know how to receive kindness without suspecting it. You’re the reason love feels like a fuckin’ trap half the time. You’re the reason compassion makes my skin crawl if it catches me off guard. You’re the reason emotions that aren’t violent or angry feel unnatural to me.”

Malcolm opened his mouth, and Jimmy’s head snapped up.

“I’m *not* done speaking,” Jimmy said, and now the steel showed, “so *shut* the *fuck* up, or I’ll *swear* to the fuckin’ *sky*, I’ll revert to being the monstrous fuckin’ threat I was on Earth,

redeemed or not."

Malcolm went still so fast it was visible. His face changed, *fear* entered it. *Good*, Jimmy thought, *about fuckin' time.* Jimmy pushed off the island and stood fully upright.

"You're the reason I will never feel truly fuckin' sane," Jimmy continued, "no matter how redeemed I am, no matter how much peace I find here, no matter how much love I'm surrounded by. There's always going to be somethin' in me that feels…*off*."

Jimmy gave a tiny shrug with one shoulder, bitter and cold.

"There will always be somethin' in me that makes me feel weird inside, wrong inside—like I'm stitched together crooked."

Malcolm said nothing now. Jimmy stepped closer by an inch.

"You're the reason I heard Satan's voice," Jimmy said, "you're the reason why for twenty-eight years, I had a *twisted*, violent, *fucked* up understanding of what fuckin' charity was, and you're the reason why I did the *worst* fuckin' things I've ever done to people who didn't even deserve it."

That landed like a physical blow. Malcolm's face paled. Jimmy's own expression didn't soften; it only sharpened.

"So for those reasons," Jimmy said, "I will never, ever fuckin' forgive you. And I don't want you anywhere *near* the beautiful sanctity that is Pelmont."

Now Jimmy moved, slowly, *deliberately*. He walked right up into Malcolm's space until they were nearly nose to nose, until Malcolm had no choice but to meet his eyes and finally see that this was not a wounded child begging for recognition. This was the *man* that *child* had grown into. This was Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal with all his damage weaponized, and all his sentiment burned down to a verdict. Jimmy stared directly into Malcolm's eyes and spoke in a low, deadly voice.

"I made a promise to myself," Jimmy said, "after gainin' the family I never truly had and never thought I'd be deservin' of, I swore that if I ever had children of my own one day, I would *never* fuckin' treat them the way you treated me."

Jimmy took one more tiny step in.

"Now, you've got two choices, Malcolm."

Malcolm swallowed. Jimmy didn't blink, and he didn't shift. His gaze stayed locked on Malcolm—steady, unflinching, and utterly done with the man in front of him.

"And before you say another word," Jimmy said, "before you even *think* about threatenin' me again—let's get one thing *very* fuckin' clear."

Jimmy took a slow step forward.

“I’m *not* a little boy anymore.”

Jimmy’s voice didn’t rise, if anything, it dropped—low, controlled, dangerous.

“I’m a *grown man* now.”

A faint, humorless smile pulled at Jimmy’s mouth.

“So whatever that was last night, that little ‘you will obey me or I swear’ routine?”

Jimmy shook his head once, slow and dismissive.

“That shite doesn’t scare me,” Jimmy said, “not this mornin’, not now, not *ever* again.”

There was no hesitation in Jimmy anymore, no flicker of the child who used to flinch, who used to run and hide in fear, only certainty. Jimmy’s eyes hardened further.

“So, as I said—you’ve got *two* choices, Malcolm.”

Malcolm swallowed again, quieter this time.

“You can fuckin’ leave Pelmont on your own and go find some other realm to spend the rest of your fuckin’ existence in…”

Jimmy’s mouth twitched into a terrible smile.

“*Or* I can beat the living shite out of you from one end of this kitchen to the other—which would feel *really* fuckin’ good to me right now—and then I can kick you out of Pelmont myself.”

Malcolm’s breathing changed. Jimmy saw it and kept going.

“Either way, I don’t fuckin’ *want* to see you here. Not now. Not *ever*. You don’t deserve this place, and you *never* fuckin’ will.”

Jimmy’s voice dropped even lower.

“You’ve got exactly thirty seconds to make your fuckin’ choice.”

Everything went silent as Malcolm stared at him. For fifteen seconds, he didn’t move, clearly trying to decide whether Jimmy was bluffing, whether the son in front of him was still governable by old scripts, old guilt, old fear. Then he saw it. Jimmy wasn’t bluffing, not even a little. The threat Jimmy made was no performance. It wasn’t adolescent posturing. It was the fully conscious restraint of a man who knew exactly what he was capable of and was being kind enough, by some miracle, not to demonstrate it. Malcolm swallowed hard. Then, very carefully, he nodded.

“I’ll be gone by nightfall,” Malcolm said.

"*Good*," Jimmy said, a brief, contrived smile touching his mouth. "Now get your pathetic, sorry ass the *fuck* out of my house."

Jimmy didn't step back; he didn't make room for dignity, he just stared. Malcolm moved around him quickly then, all hope of reconciliation blown clean out of his face, his earlier self-importance replaced by something far less flattering: fear. He went for the door, opened it, and left with the hurried stiffness of a man who had realized too late that he had mistaken mercy for weakness. The door shut behind him, and Jimmy was alone.

Scene Song: "Promised Land" ~ 28 Years Later

For one second, two seconds, then three, Jimmy stood exactly where he was, staring as if his body hadn't yet received the message that it was over. Then all the air went out of him. He let out a long, ragged exhale, the kind that felt dragged from somewhere deeper than lungs, and one hand came briefly to the table in front of him as if he needed it there. He shut his eyes. The silence in the kitchen felt huge, not empty, not broken, just immense, like something old had finally been torn loose. Jimmy stood there and breathed through it. Outside, Pelmont still glowed in the last strong light of day.

The orange sun hung low now, rich and molten, flooding the kitchen in gold through the windows. It touched the counters, the table, and the floor. It touched Jimmy too—his chains, his rings, the edge of his jaw, the tracksuit, the body that had survived all of it and still stood there breathing. Slowly, he opened his eyes. The house was quiet, no church, no shouting, no father's voice, only the sea in the distance. The faint rustle of palms. The sound of his own breathing evened out, one measured pull at a time. He looked down at his hands. They weren't shaking; that surprised him. He stared at them for another second, then let out the smallest, strangest laugh—dry, disbelieving, almost private.

"Well," he murmured to the empty kitchen, "how fuckin'zat."

And then, with the sun pouring gold around him and the doorway behind him finally empty of the man who had haunted him for the longest, Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal turned and walked out of the kitchen. He went into the living room, switched on the television, and dropped onto the sofa with a long exhale, one arm stretched across the back cushion. The noise of the TV filled the room—some foolish program, some bright flickering distraction, something living and ordinary and free of churches and fathers and ghosts.

Jimmy sat there in the low golden light with his face still set slightly hard from everything that had just passed through him, but underneath it, there was something new now. Not softness, not peace exactly, *space*. Room to breathe, the kind of feeling a man might have after watching the last ghost leave his house. And as the sun burned low over Pelmont and the television murmured on in the gathering evening, Jimmy leaned back into his own silence at last—still Sir Lord Jimmy Crystal, still sharp-edged, still strange and scarred and impossible—but finally, unquestionably, *free*.